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THE CREATIVE MYSTERY

BY WILFRID L. RANDELL

THE first written story, probably scratched on a tablet of smoothed bark or slate, must have been a record of an actual occurrence. Even if it merely reproduced in rough, almost illegible characters, the legend of past battles or of heroes hitherto commemorated only in ballad or in song, it was no less the fixing of a fact; and we can amuse ourselves by picturing the student with his tools, the centre of an admiring crowd, successful and happy in having constructed a visible, tangible memory—something that could be handled and carried about, circulated, scanned again and again. For many centuries after this great event, this first meeting of the author in the pride of composition with the public eager to read his work, the “book,” if we may so term it, was concerned with the setting down of facts—hard, irrefutable, unimaginative facts. It told, for the benefit of others who were not present, what somebody did, and later on, doubtless, what somebody said. Not until other centuries had rolled round, we may suppose, did that lightning-flash of inspiration illumine some especially receptive mind whose owner suddenly, in a fine frenzy of invention, bethought himself of putting on record what somebody *might* have done, or *might* have said. As yet, every book was a work of reference.

The moment which marked the possibility of describing things that *could* happen, or that *might* have happened, buried as it is now in the irrecoverable deeps of time, marked also the onset of a wonder-working change that stretched down the ages, until, by a thousand tentacles, it entangles the life of today. It implied the dawn of imagination, the beginning of the creative mystery by which a myriad differing visions are clothed with flesh and blood

and given to the vital breath. The teller of stories began to perceive—very slowly, indeed, that within his own limited being lay a strange, unsuspected, unlimited power: that he possessed a magic crucible by which all things he observed, all things he heard, might not only be stored as memories, but might be transmuted, re-cast, projected and given forth in a marvellous semblance of life. Astonishing vistas were henceforward opened to his fascinated gaze, though stumbling indeed must have been his first bewildered steps in the effort to explore their endless, lonely labyrinths. Yet, as from the crude, imitative daubs of the troglodytes rose the glorious realm of pictorial art, and as from the ancient poets and *trouvères* grew the stately palaces of literature, so, from these hesitating attempts to ensnare the bright gleams of imagination, the vast enterprises of the fiction of modern times may trace their lineal descent.

It is of permanent interest to endeavor to follow, even for a brief period, the results of this enormous development of human appreciations, to consider what is meant, and to glance at certain difficulties immediately evolved by its progress. And first, a pretty problem in psychology confronts the student, a problem as full of latent argument as the recurring assertions that the actor should, or should not, feel the emotions he portrays. It is indeed rather of a kin with this favorite puzzle of debate, though, by leave of the dictators of the stage, we may set it upon a higher plane. If, for convenience of treatment, we momentarily narrow it down for illustration to a familiar example—that of Charlotte Brontë—it will not mean the revival of any unprofitable discussions or dissensions as to claims of authorship. The bare statement is this: a young woman, living quietly in a country parsonage, conveys into her novels far more than she has ever seen or heard or experienced, and conveys it so convincingly, so strongly, that few flaws can be found with the presentment and arrangement of her material. Her one-sided correspondence with her Professor will not suffice to explain the mystery; how then shall we approach it, how comprehend it?

Since Charlotte Brontë lived and wrote, the course of prose fiction is strewn with illustrations, not, perhaps, as striking, but certainly quite as curious. Characters in fiction may be roughly divided into two broad classes; those based on observation of a particular person, sometimes to

such an extent that we can recognize them; and those based on general observation—imagined, yet bearing authentic attributes of human nature. To the former class belong Vernon Whitford in *The Egotist*; Mr. Micawber; certain personages in recent novels of Mr. H. G. Wells; and, we believe, sweet Milly Theale in *The Wings of the Dove*. To the latter class belong an immense number of characters, ranging from Sir Willoughby Patterne and Mr. Rochester to the Prince in *The Prisoner of Zenda* and the heroes or heroines of innumerable unimportant stories of amorous or political intrigue. It is odd to recall the blunders some writers have made when attacking this problem. Trollope, rarely a sound critic (he was much too plodding and level-headed to be that, for all critics should have reckless and splendid enthusiasms) when he was analysing Blanche Amory in *Pendennis* came across this passage: "For this young lady was not able to carry out any emotion to the full, but had a sham enthusiasm, a sham hatred, a sham love, a sham taste, a sham grief; each of which flared and shone very vehemently for an instant, but subsided, and gave place to the next sham emotion." He was moved thereupon to write: "Thackeray, when he drew this portrait, must certainly have had some special young lady in his view." It may or may not have been so; but nothing is less likely if we are to suppose this a rule. Thackeray was one of the creators; in the general flow of his mind he, in common with others, was able to imagine and to "describe" almost at will those who should best carry on his scheme. Incidentally, a few pages earlier in the book Trollope unconsciously assumes his proper aspect by stating didactically: "The object of a novel should be to instruct in morals while it amuses."

It would seem that in many cases the strenuous efforts made by certain modern writers to obtain "local color" are unnecessary. "The description of the characters is well done," says the routine reviewer—as though he referred to a joint of beef; and perhaps the characters, speaking strictly, were not "described" at all, but were subjective, called into being by that ready inward vision, to be scrutinized and noted as fit themes by the brain, half producer, half critic. Introspection, at its most subtle stage of refinement, is here in full employment; but it is not precisely the faculty or process depicted by those whose business it

is to study the intricacies of the mind. "Introspection," wrote a noted psychologist, "is very often the direct inspection and perception of experience, whereby its different elements and their aspects are classified, tabulated and compared. When we have to deal with complex experiences or trains of experiences, we must often reconstruct them gradually in repeated trials by memory, and if we fancy our memories may deceive us, try to register their simplest or most distinct effects, and by the study of these ensure a better and fuller remembrance and description of them." This, however, will not help us at all to comprehend the inward vision of the creative artist; so far from finding the elements of his experience "classified, tabulated and compared," he has often to *make his experiences for himself*.

It is perfectly true, of course, that we cannot imagine anything of which we have previously had no knowledge. We can picture a flying cow, but we are familiar with cows and with wings; we can see with the mind's eye distant rivers and mountains and icy wastes as described by explorers, but we are familiar with their component parts. We cannot conceive, try how we will, an animal lacking head and body and tail; nothing so extraordinary has ever come within our range. Even the strenuous ingenuity of Swift could merely exaggerate humanity in the Brobdingnagians, diminish it in the Lilliputians, and distort it in the Houyhnhnms. From the persons and places and objects which we have seen and read of, from the conversations we have heard, it is possible, however, to construct any number of combinations and elaborations. On a basis of fact, the imaginative artist builds a structure so firm and shapely and imposing and sometimes so beautiful that he wins from the world the final, incontrovertible title of creator, even though we know quite well that what we behold is but his dreaming made manifest.

The mediocre novelist, entertaining though he may be, and skilful at his task by using the impalpable, diffused "material" accumulated by his busy brain, never reaches this stage. His characters may have individuality, may be recognizable and well differentiated, but they fail to move us. Individuality and personality are two very different attributes: the one is the mechanical working model, the other the living, breathing man. Illustrations may easily be drawn from the books of acknowledged masters. Trol-

lope, for instance, was a master of the art of mere storytelling, but his people are organisms of a low degree of vitality. Their movements interest us exceedingly, but they never become as intimate friends or arouse a definite enmity; we meet them with pleasure, we leave them without a sigh. Even Mary Thorne, perhaps the most attractive woman he has given us, loses her value the moment the tale closes with her marriage to Frank Gresham—we feel that she has accomplished her life's work, has held out bravely until the last knot of a clever tangle has been unravelled, but that the impact of her personality has been very trifling.

To examine, by way of contrast, the work of a master such as George Meredith is to realize a difference that is startling. Despite the almost metallic brilliance of the conversation in such a book as *One of Our Conquerors*—a brilliance which has at times even a disruptive tendency—we are forced to feel the problem of Victor and Nataly; we are smirched with the lost honor; the crash of the terrible final collapse rings in our ears; and, though we prefer to regard Meredith as artist rather than moralist, the message thunders at us from the ruins. Here is a triumph of personality in fiction. The creative mystery is no less vivid in the work of Mr. Thomas Hardy. Who can fail to visualise Tess as a suffering human being? We set the story aside to think of her and her troubles; the grim pursuit of fate reacts upon the reader; the creation of the novelist's brain has achieved the garb of flesh, has walked and talked with us. And in one respect Mr. Hardy has the advantage of Meredith: his minor characters, almost without exception, are as convincing as his heroes and his heroines. If we take another example, from the work of Mr. Henry James, we are on more delicate ground; he has his select circle, and it increases but slowly. Few would venture to deny his paramount creative power, his projection of a score of living fictional personalities. Turning back to Charles Dickens, we find the line of demarcation between individuality and personality difficult to draw; in so many cases Dickens invented some easy, exaggerated peculiarity for his characters and let it stand as a label of sure identification—a mean way of shuffling out of the true creative task. Certain of his chief characters—Uriah Heep, for example—simply “give away” the trick—albeit the trick of a superb craftsman. Yet we are bound to concede that creation went

hand in hand with observation in so amusing a couple as the Wellers, and that in some instances, such as the Cheeryble brothers, Captain Cuttle, Mr. Pecksniff, Mary Tapley, and others that will be brought to mind by a moment's reflection, Dickens succeeded in reaching a more purely creative plane.

Is, then, the creative mystery exhibited so freely by so many exponents, explicable as a matter of practice or perseverance? The men whom we have considered were men of the active world, competent and shrewd; Charlotte Brontë, compared with them, was a secluded flower in a country garden. Wherein lies the secret?

For a satisfactory reply to this question we should clear from our minds the notion that travel and wide experience of the world are necessary elements in the composition of the creative force; we must contemplate the point briefly in the light of pure psychology. Tremendous adventures of the soul may take place in an armchair by the fire. "The man's true life," said Robert Louis Stevenson in an inspired passage, "for which he consents to live, may lie altogether in the fields of fancy. The clergyman in his spare hours may be winning battles, the farmer sailing ships, the banker reaping triumphs in the arts." And if, as a modern poet-philosopher has put it, "all that happens to us is divinely great, and we are always in the centre of a great world," we may be certain that the creative impulse has abundance of material to labor upon when its subtle urgings begin, scanty though its field may seem to the superficial observer. Scorning the limitations of the body, the mind sets forth, exploring, hovering, selecting and rejecting, exulting in the perpetual variety of its vision and the perfection of its freedom. Placing its own conceptions within other imagined minds, it watches them develop and move independently, and thrills to find them suddenly endowed with separate life, working out their unearthly destinies, equipped with volition and a sphere of action.

Can it, then, capture this wonder, snare it confidently in the net of words?—for without this entirely distinct and final process all far flights of creative fancy must be in vain. The artist, controlling, patient, persistent, compels himself to answer this question, which is ever before him. The sculptor, seeing the statue in the block of shapeless marble, may know inspiration and despair; but with quick, careful

hand he chisels away the rough surface until the desired outline appears. So is it with the creative literary artist: sometimes eager, sometimes downcast, he strives to finish that last necessary labor by which alone his dream may be sent abroad to enchant his fellows. Yet, just as miracles might be termed the language of heaven, whose transcendent alphabet we mortals are able to scan and puzzle out letter by letter, so the human creator feels that he is but piecing together faithfully the smallest sentences in a majestic language which as yet is not clearly apprehended. One who has spent a long life in the exposition of complex relationships and interactions assures us that he is compelled to realise that so far he has touched the merest outer fringe of his chosen subject; yet he has penetrated farther than most men into this mysterious region of wraiths, fantasies, echoes and undertones. He is humbled, as we all are when a glimpse of the truth takes us by surprise, at the splendor of the vision and the incompetence of the interpreter; he feels that the greatest of us suffers a sense of artistic destitution—he sits, poised, hesitant and abashed, with pen in unready hand, before the presence of beauty that makes him ache to record its lightest reflections—to *create*, in an earthly medium, the fashion of spiritual things.

Astonishingly, indeed, have we travelled in our quest: We have seen that the creative artist may be the silent central point of a brilliant universe; that his experiences may be love-laden without love; convivial without companions; spacious and assured without wanderings in strange lands; agitated and impetuous without discordant voices; furious and wounded without the shock of battle; and that the secret thoughts of a man, his memories and fancies, incommunicable unless he pleases, compose, in the most profound and significant sense, his life itself, wherein as to friendly shelter he may withdraw, secure, unapproachable, supremely content, to give forth in due time the adventures of his soul.

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